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Rupture(s) en Révolution

Introduction — Ruptures in revolution

Perceiving and managing ruptures in revolutionary times

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Introduction — Ruptures in revolution

Perceiving and managing ruptures in revolutionary times

Irène Herrmann

- 1 On February 26 2011, during the so-called Jasmine Revolution, a Tunisian newspaper stated: “A revolution is, by definition, a rupture with the past”¹. This interpretation is not new and tellingly confirms what dictionaries and encyclopedias suggest. Revolutions are always defined as radical changes and thus indeed evoke the idea of a rupture with the past, of a break in continuity. This seemingly obvious interconnectedness might be the reason why the link between rupture and revolution has never been truly questioned. Except for Jean Baechler’s article, published in the *European journal of sociology* in 1974 and actually aiming at reevaluating the origins of the French Revolution, research on this topic has remained rather scarce, as exploring rupture in revolutions may seem somewhat redundant if not useless.
- 2 However, in October 2010, Antoine Broussy organized a seminar, which focused on the connections between revolution and rupture and examined the way this link is effectively managed and perceived. The seminar was held in Paris, under the auspices of the *Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution française*, a research center that, as a whole and until recently, had long considered the French revolution as a crucial founding moment and as a true rupture between the Ancient Régime and modern times. Yet, as it sometimes happens, examining the (apparently) obvious proved extremely interesting and fruitful. The conference, gathering scholars admittedly interested in apparently atypical cases, not only revealed that the link between revolution and rupture is not as plain as usually expected. It also proved that this very link is actually the result of various multileveled phenomena, related to conceptual history, perceptions of historical events and times, political uses of continuity and discontinuity, historiography and, last but not least, psychological factors.
- 3 First, from a conceptual perspective, the term “revolution” itself only slowly acquired the political meaning it retains today. It is well-known that it derives from the Latin term *revolvere*, to roll or throw back, and that it primarily had a strong astronomical connotation that was more likely to evoke evolution than rupture. What is less known,

however, is that even Hobbes, who was meant to become so decisive an inspirer in the field of political theory, used both old and new meanings of the word². Moreover, there is still some vagueness and confusion about it today. In 20th Century Egypt, for instance, its connotation varied considerably and, depending on the event, the speaker and his audience, Revolution could signify a total disruption in society or a mere political protest that would hardly evoke the notion of rupture³.

- 4 This conceptual uncertainty is indubitably related to the (temporal) nature of revolutions. Although most contemporaries seem to truly perceive revolutions as ruptures, it is sometimes difficult to tell when they begin and often tricky to establish when they end. This perception of revolutionary events is closely related to the perception of time, as several theoretical authors have pointed out. Most of them indeed agree with the idea that any revolution introduces a rupture with the past. However, whereas some of them consider revolutionary periods as taking place in a constant present, others consider revolution as spaces destined to realizing utopias, in which the present and the future interpenetrate⁴ – so that, in a way, both interpretations converge and confirm the rupture with the past that contemporaries seem to perceive.
- 5 Even if there seems to be a kind of consensus concerning the existence of a revolutionary rupture with the past as it is happening⁵, it is rarely presented as such, as the analysis of *a posteriori* comments and historiography clearly shows. Although the French revolutionaries obviously intended to break with the past, they generally didn't want/expect it to happen too abruptly. Furthermore, they believed this break to be at least partially a return to the once existing "natural rights", so that it wasn't exclusively considered as a rupture⁶. In the Hungarian and Egyptian cases, revolutions are clearly taken into account as ruptures. However, they are compared with and included in a series of other revolutionary events⁷. In Switzerland, the revolutionary rupture seems to be duly stressed, as the invasion of French troops and the implementation of a unitary governmental system are considered unique in the country's history⁸. Conversely, French jurists designated the revolutionary and post-revolutionary law by using the notion of "intermediary law"⁹. In both cases, the revolutionary period was put in parenthesis. While this discursive process didn't legitimize the revolution, it legitimized all the rest of Swiss or French history.
- 6 Thus, these case studies show that there may be a wide gap between the way revolutions are perceived and presented. This difference is admittedly related to the effects these presentations are supposed to produce on the audience. In other words, it often has strong political causes. Logically, one might believe that those advocating the changes introduced by the revolution tend to stress this rupture, whereas the other authors tend to underline the continuities. Actually the sources draw a far more diversified landscape. Those opposed to the revolution occupy both extremities of the spectrum by either exaggeratedly stressing or totally denying the rupture. The first solution is a way of proving the revolution to be alien to the country's history and political culture; whereas the second solution is used in countries in which the "externalization" proves impossible, as a way of discrediting the revolution and, once again, of ignoring its results, or even its very existence.
- 7 Authors in favor of the revolution tend to profess less extreme opinions, as if they didn't quite dare value a rupture *per se* and, often and inventively enough, tried to insert it in a kind of continuity, deriving from a cyclic or progressive understanding of human evolution. In some texts, revolution is considered as a desirable or at least acceptable

means of helping humanity to reach an higher stage of development. The achievement of this desirable evolution is always located in the future, and sometimes simultaneously in the past, near or remote – depending on whether the author ascribes to the past an exemplary role or not. In any case, whatever the choice and its true motivations may be, this kind of presentation aims at justifying the revolution by insisting on its evolutionary aspect. In other sources, the revolution is inserted in a kind of continuity of ruptures, so that their specificity as a true break is relativized and eventually fading. From this point of view, the revolution belongs to a chain of revolutions, to a tradition that legitimizes it.

- 8 Both supporters and opponents tend to present revolutions in a way that legitimizes their opinion and ultimately their (non-)action. Interestingly enough, this rather common attempt at legitimization is more often than not achieved by inserting the revolutionary rupture in a kind of continuity, whatever the authors' true experience and political use of it. Considering that this outcome doesn't reflect the nature of most revolutions, one must admit that it fits either the audiences to which these presentations are addressed or the authors who elaborate them, or both. In other words, this result seemingly reflects some psychological difficulty to deal with ruptures, to make sense of them without inserting them in the flux of events and time.
- 9 So, if revolutions are, by definition, breaks in history, this doesn't mean however that social actors are able or even willing to break with their past. Moreover, political actors are supposed to show some constancy, be it of action or ideals. The topic of national historians requires some constancy as well, since they are supposed to write on their nation's past, hence discarding what is considered alien to it. Thus, historiographical, political as well as psychological factors concur to challenge the notion of rupture, however strongly it may be felt by the contemporaries of revolutions.
- 10 In a way, the rupture can be totally acknowledged either during a revolution, when the changes strike all contemporaries, as at the beginning of the Jasmine Revolution; or after a revolution such as the French Revolution, when supporters and opponents have opposite reasons of emphasizing (or stigmatizing) the radical changes introduced by the revolution. In other words, although the link between revolution and rupture seems obvious if not tautological, it clearly appears when social actors are doomed or at least fiercely willing to underline the rupture. Paradoxically enough, analyzing this link highlights the political, historical and psychological difficulties of admitting a true rupture – which might contribute to explain why research on this notion has been somewhat neglected until now.

NOTES

1. <http://www.tunisie-expression.com/opinions/blogs/revolution-devoirs-de-protection-de-garanti-de-ses-acquis-et-de-ses-revendications/>
2. See Mikko JAKONEN's paper.
3. See Giedre SABASEVICIUTE's paper.
4. As Wolfgang KRUSE had pointed out in his speech at the symposium.

5. See Aurore CHÉRY's paper.
 6. See Erwan SOMMERER's paper.
 7. See Emilia PALONEN's paper.
 8. See Antoine BROUSSY's paper.
 9. See Eric DEMARI's paper.
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